

Sermon: Walking in the light

Our second reading today comes from John's first letter, and the style of John's letters is different from the letters of Paul (with which we're most familiar), or from the letters of Peter, Jude, James, and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews.

The thing that marks John's letters isn't careful argument as we're used to from Paul, nor is it the passionate outpourings of ideas which we might expect from Peter. Instead, the thing that really stands out John's letters is love. God's love for us, and how we respond to that love. And that reflects how we see John portrayed in John's gospel.

But as well as talking about love, John often contemplates theology, which people often think of as some dry, academic topic, but it need not be, because at its heart, theology is about how we understand God. How we understand who Jesus was and what Jesus accomplished.

John's theology is hardly dry and academic – because it comes from his love for God, and his personal relationship with Jesus. And it was a deeply personal relationship – he was a disciple of Jesus, he was called by him, he walked with him, he saw the miracles, he heard the teaching... and he watched him die, and he was a witness to Jesus' resurrection.

And it's as a witness that John writes this letter, he writes "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched..." (1:1)

He leaves no room to doubt what he's about to share: He's heard it. He's seen it. What he's talking about is real. I can imagine John as a witness in court, declaring: "I swear that I will tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

He also says, "... we have heard... we have seen...we proclaim". That's not him using the "royal we", it's him numbering himself with the disciples. What John declares, what John has heard and what John has seen and so on... isn't just what he says, heard and saw, but it's what the disciples heard and saw.

Even if you're not familiar with John's first letter, you're probably familiar with the opening of John's gospel – it's well known, and it's a standard Christmas reading "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with

God, and the Word was God.” And the opening of his gospel moves on very quickly from talking about the Word, to talking about light – he says (John 1:4-5) “in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Light and darkness are important concepts for John, and that importance is reflected in his letter.

In verse 5 he says “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.”

That can be uncomfortable, and it’s certainly not the way the world thinks these days, but John tells us that it’s a stark contrast. There is light and there is darkness. There is no light in darkness, because if there were, it wouldn’t count as dark any more. And similarly, you can’t have darkness in light.

God is light, says John, in him there is no darkness at all.

So just like you either have light or darkness, you either have God or no God.

Some people will try and have a little bit of God, but it doesn’t work that way. Some people will say “well, I do lots of good things, so I should be right with God”, some people will happily write on a census form that they are Christian, but their lives won’t reflect that.

John sets us straight, though, verse 6: If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.

If your claimed faith isn’t reflected in how you live your life... then it can’t be real faith.

So John tells us what real faith is like: “but if we walk in the light” John says “, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”

If we’re doing the right thing, if we’re living our lives as God wants us to – if we’re walking in the light, as John puts it – then two things happen.

Firstly, we have fellowship with one another – and I think it’s worth noting that he puts that first, because lots of people jump straight to the second thing. But we have fellowship with one another, as we are walking in the

light. We are not alone – while we’re walking with God, we’re also walking with each other.

And then we get to the second thing John tells us happens when we walk in the light: the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Note that he says, “purifies” not “has purified”: Because the purification – the cleansing - that we receive isn’t a one-off thing, it’s an ongoing thing, and ongoing process throughout our lives as followers of Jesus. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. It cleans us from sins past, sins present, and will clean us from sins into the future as well.

If we are walking in the light, what’s wrong with our lives - the darkness - is removed. You might remember the story of Jesus’ death as it’s told in John’s gospel, and recall that Jesus’ last words from the cross were “It is finished” and we can reflect that what was finished was the initiation of the Kingdom of God. The mission of Jesus to pay the price for all that is wrong with the world was completed in his death. It was confirmed by his resurrection, but it was completed in his death.

So we have to wonder, does that mean that if we’re followers of God, then we are free of darkness and sin? Well, I don’t know about you, but my experience is that that is not the case.

That’s what John’s talking about here.

We don’t get to walk in the light with God because we’re perfect or because we’re good people. We get to walk in the light because of Jesus.

The temptation though, is to think – or even say – that because we’re Christians, because we go to church, we’re good people.

And while, as we all grow in the knowledge and love of God, we will be transformed, we will become more like Jesus, as John tells us in verse 8 “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

Several years ago, I was visiting a church and taking a service, and while I was chatting to people after the service a fellow approached me, and said “Richie, why do we confess our sins in every service? We’re all older people here, and none of us sin very much. I don’t think we have anything to confess most of the time.”

Now I don't know if it was a genuine question - if he was actually asking why. Or if perhaps he'd decided there was no need to confess and was hoping that the visiting preacher would agree with him? Or maybe he was testing me, to check that my theology agreed with his?

I think it was probably the last one, and I don't remember exactly what my answer was, but I do remember I ummed and ahhed a bit to start with. Whatever I said, though, I know I didn't put it as well as John does here in verse 8 "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

After all, if we don't admit that something's wrong, how can we expect it to be fixed? And if we don't make an effort to change, how can we expect our lives to be fixed? If we're not open to changing because of God's grace, then how can we really know God's grace?

As we mature as Christians, as we walk in God's light, we will be transformed, we will be made "better", if you like, but again, we won't be perfect this side of the new creation.

But if we confess the sins we commit, we will find forgiveness, always. Of course the other side of that is if we do not confess our sins, we will not find forgiveness

So in verse 10, John adds "If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us."

Again, Christians aren't perfect, but we are forgiven. Though there's often been an expectation that Christians are perfect. Or at least better than non-Christians. Indeed, I think the most common criticism of Christians is that they're hypocrits. Or rather, that we're hypocrits.

Jesus, told the people that "... the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach." (Matt 23:2-3).

The Pharisees were saying the right things, but not doing the right things.

We need to make sure we're not doing the same.

It's heavy stuff, isn't it? It's tough confronting our failings, as a society, as a church and particularly as individuals. I think we all know, though, that

there are things wrong with our world, our society, our church, and our own lives.

But in the face of all that, we can be reassured, and we can be confident, as John says “the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” and “we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

John brings this all up right at the beginning this letter. It’s hard stuff to deal with, but it’s necessary. And it’s the background to everything that comes later in John’s letter.

John’s not writing to be harsh. He’s not threatening sinners with fire and brimstone.

He’s writing this, as he said in verse 4 “... to make our joy complete.”

When I was asked the question about why do we confess our sins, I ummed and ahed but explained why. But I pointed out that whenever we confess our sins in church, we also remind ourselves that we are forgiven.

Because the emphasis isn’t on the sin, and nor is it on the darkness, it’s on forgiveness and light. The forgiveness and light that God offers us through his Son.

And he calls us to follow him, to walk in the light. And we humbly remember, if we do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; who is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

We, as Christians, as followers of Jesus – people who have turned to him in faith – are God’s people. By his grace we are forgiven. We need to accept that grace, and to be open to that grace changing us. Changing us from people who walk in the darkness to people who walk in the light. Today, tomorrow and always.

Amen.